



Terrorism Monitor

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Free Syria Army

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1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320
Washington, DC • 20036
Tel: (202) 483-8888
Fax: (202) 483-8337

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TALIBAN SPOKESMAN SAYS LOYA JIRGA REVEALS THE INVADERS' "SINISTER OBJECTIVE" TO OCCUPY AFGHANISTAN

In a recent interview with a Taliban-run news agency, Afghan Taliban spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi provided an official response to the recent Kabul *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) that approved a continued American military presence in Afghanistan as well as an assessment of the Taliban's struggle against NATO forces in various regions of the country. [1]

The four-day *Loya Jirga* produced a nearly unanimous vote in favor of a strategic agreement with the United States that would permit the continued presence of American military bases in Afghanistan after the scheduled pull-out of U.S. forces in 2014. There were, however, conditions attached, including an end to night raids on residential housing, the closure of all prisons operated by foreign forces and accountability to the Afghan justice system for Americans who commit crimes in Afghanistan (Khaama Press [Kabul], November 19).

The Taliban spokesman suggested that the *Loya Jirga* decision would actually play into the Taliban's hands: "The people have realized that the invaders are here for sinister objectives. They want to endanger our religion, prestige and other sanctities at the hands of a few traitors and corrupt agents. They want to keep us as an occupied nation and impose their own systems upon us."

Given the *Loya Jirga*'s decision, the Taliban spokesman was asked how long the Taliban will continue to fight against a foreign military presence: "Jihad is a religious obligation upon us. We have no specified time framework for it. When

the need for Jihad is ceased, the war will naturally come to an end. It totally depends on the invaders.”

The Taliban spokesman also offered an assessment of the military situation in the southern and northern operational theaters:

- In the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, the site of some of the war’s fiercest clashes, the spokesman admits the Taliban have been driven out of some areas, but attributes this to the occupiers’ complete destruction of orchards and houses in these districts. Otherwise he denies NATO claims that the Taliban are restricted to limited areas in the south of these provinces, insisting that foreign forces are confined to their bases in urban centers while the Taliban conduct attacks throughout the rest of the region at will. Qari Yusuf suggests the inaccurate perception of the situation in the southern provinces is partly due to “the absence of free international media” to observe and report Taliban activities accurately. While attributing this absence to threats against journalists by internal and external secret services, this complaint from an official spokesman demonstrates the Taliban’s growing appreciation for the value of the media in the struggle for Afghanistan. The movement once known for smashing televisions now manages a website in five languages, Twitter and Facebook accounts, radio stations, magazines and a video production company that posts its work on YouTube (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], December 1).

- In the northern provinces, particularly Kunduz, a decrease in Taliban activity is blamed on the reluctance of the “mostly non-American” NATO garrisons there “who are fed up with this war” to venture far from their bases, thus reducing the opportunities for Taliban operations. Nonetheless, Qari Yusuf says the Taliban is continuing to increase its presence in the north. The Kunduz Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is one of five PRTs that come under ISAF’s

Regional Command-North. With Germany as the lead nation, PRT-Kunduz includes German, Belgian, Armenian and American troops.

Qari Yusuf summed up the rationale behind the Taliban’s continued commitment to a military resolution in Afghanistan rather than entering into political negotiations:

We can never tolerate foreign invasion in our country. We want the strict implementation of Islamic rules and regulations. We want Islamic brotherhood and unity among the countrymen. We want cordial relation with the world on the basis of Islamic principles where no one is harmed. But the enemy is extending the occupation and is dreaming for a prolonged subjugation of our country. In these circumstances we are compelled to insist on a military solution rather than political one because the enemy is not ready to leave our country... and to solve the disputed issues by political negotiations.

Qari Yusuf also stressed that the Taliban’s operational flexibility is a factor in its favor: “When we notice that the public and the mujahideen are both under pressure, simultaneously we open new fronts in other villages and districts. In the same way if one zone is under pressure, we have increased our activities in other zones... We have entered a new phase in the war where we have been able to inflict heavy losses on the enemy and have significantly reduced our own.”

Note:

1. Afghan Islamic News Agency, “Interview of the Spokesman of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” Ansar1.info, December 4, 2011.

ASSAULT ON LIBYAN NATIONAL ARMY COMMANDER'S CONVOY REVEALS RIFTS BETWEEN MILITIAS

As the murder of General Abd al-Fatah Yunis and two of his aides on July 28 showed, Libya's new government is still subject to the whims of the diverse armed factions that overthrew Mu'ammar Qaddafi. [1]

The uneasy relationship between the various self-styled "Brigades" that emerged victorious in the revolution was demonstrated once again on December 10 when members of the Zintan militia became involved in a firefight with a convoy carrying Major General Khalifa Haftar, a CIA-supported anti-Qaddafi dissident who has taken command of the nascent Libyan National Army in a process that has been poorly received by many of the militia leaders.

The clash just outside of Tripoli International Airport came the same day as a national reconciliation conference opened in Tripoli (al-Jazeera, December 11). A military spokesman, Sergeant Abd al-Razik al-Shibahy, characterized the attack as an "assassination attempt," saying two vehicles had awaited the arrival of the convoy under a bridge before opening fire (al-Jazeera, December 11).

The commander of the Zintan militia, Colonel Mukhtar Fernana, gave a very different account, saying Haftar's heavily-armed convoy refused to stop at a checkpoint 3km from the airport and opened fire on the militiamen, wounding two. The Zintan fighters pursued Haftar's convoy to a nearby military camp where a second gun-battle broke out (AFP, December 11; Reuters, December 12). Two Zintani fighters were reported killed and two others wounded, with no casualties in General Haftar's convoy (AFP, December 11). A spokesman for the Zintan Brigade, Khalid al-Zintani, suggested the incident was more of a misunderstanding, saying the army had failed to notify the militia that the general was coming to the airport (AP, December 11). Al-Zintani also expressed some of the militias' doubts about the so-called National Army led by Haftar: "Until now, we don't know anything about the Libyan national army. Who is in charge, where are the military bases, what is its chain of command or even how can rebels join it? On the ground, the so-called national army is nothing yet" (SAPA-AP, December 11).

It was unclear if the incident was related to other reports that members of "the national army" had

tried to confiscate weapons and take over an airport checkpoint from the Zintan militia that controls the airport, leading to a firefight in which at least two were wounded (AFP, December 10). The militia from Zintan, about 160 km southwest of Tripoli, is thought by many residents of Tripoli to have overstayed their welcome in that city after playing a major role in the battle to expel the Qaddafi regime. The Zintan Brigade is still holding Qaddafi's son, Sa'if al-Islam, after his capture in the deserts of southwestern Libya. Clashes in the town of Zintan with members of a neighboring tribe have also been reported in the last few days (al-Arabiya, December 14).

Haftar was unanimously approved as commander-in-chief of the yet to be formed Libyan national army on November 17 by a group of 150 ex-rebel officers, though many leading commanders (including Abd al-Hakim Belhadj, the powerful Islamist commander in Tripoli) had no say in the appointment. Many militia commanders have since come out in opposition to the move (AFP, November 19; al-Jazeera, December 11). Haftar has since said he hopes to have an operational army and police force running by the end of March, 2012, but estimates that it will still take three to five years to build an army strong enough to protect Libya's borders (AP, December 12).

The Soviet-trained Haftar was an original member of the Revolutionary Command Council that overthrew King Idris in 1969. Considered a traitor by Qaddafi after he was captured by Chadian forces during the 1980s struggle over northern Chad, Haftar agreed to defect and create the "Libyan National Army," a CIA-supported anti-Qaddafi insurgent group formed from captured Libyan troops. After a new Chadian regime expelled the LNA in 1991, the group failed to find permanent refuge elsewhere in Africa and Haftar and several hundred LNA members were resettled in the United States to await deployment against Qaddafi. Two decades later the call finally came, and Haftar and a number of LNA members returned to Libya in March to join the anti-Qaddafi revolt. [2]

The troubles at Tripoli International Airport did not end when the gunfire stopped; on December 13 air traffic controllers walked off the job in an unannounced strike that played havoc with local air schedules (Reuters, December 13). In late November, protesters from the Suq al-Jama'a district of Tripoli demanding an investigation into the deaths of several members of the Suq al-Jama'a militia in Bani Walid blocked a Tunisair Airbus full of

passengers from taking off at Tripoli's Mitiga airport, a major target during the NATO air campaign (Reuters, November 27).

Despite protests by local policemen against the continued presence of armed gunmen in the streets of Tripoli, the militias claim they are the only ones capable of protecting the capital against unnamed threats. The military council representing the militias has said the gunmen will only withdraw once a new Libyan national army is created (AFP, December 11). Without a centralized security structure, militias in Tripoli continue to man checkpoints, patrol streets and provide security at Tripoli's military and commercial airports (Gulf News, December 10). With the cessation of hostilities, the militias are essentially guarding areas of Tripoli from other militias.

Libya faces a number of challenges in developing a modern professional army; its best units supported Qaddafi and are now largely dissolved. Much of the army's best armor and artillery was destroyed in NATO air attacks and will have to be replaced. The composition of the army will also be a subject of debate. Will former supporters of the regime be allowed to join? Will tribal representation play a role in forming a new national army? Will the military leadership be based on connections or competency? What outside powers will be called upon for training and arms supplies?

In the meantime Libya is in danger of descending into warlordism. The militias are amply armed courtesy of the uncontrolled looting of the government armories and are unlikely to participate in any disarmament effort that does not involve a lucrative role in government and the simultaneous disarmament of all rival groups. Strangely enough, reconciliation with the losers in this conflict must take a back seat to reconciliation between the victors if Libya is to move forward.

Notes:

1. For the murder of al-Yunis, see Terrorism Monitor Brief, August 4.
2. For a profile of Haftar, see Derek Henry Flood, "Taking Charge of Libya's Rebels: An In-Depth Portrait of Colonel Khalifa Haftar, Militant Leadership Monitor, March 2011.

Jund al-Khilafa Operations Expand in Kazakhstan

Jacob Zenn

Jund al-Khilafa (JaK) has carried out a string of deadly attacks within Kazakhstan since October. While JaK has come no closer to achieving its goal of bringing down the government of Nursultan Nazarbayev and creating an Islamic state, it has rattled Kazakhstan in a way that the country has never experienced. Attacks on policemen and clashes with security forces are occurring with increased frequency.

A December 3 shootout in Boraldai village outside of Almaty highlights the type of threat JaK poses in Kazakhstan. Five members of a JaK cell, including the leader, and two Kazakh Special Forces soldiers were killed in a night raid on the cell's safe-house after the terrorists refused to surrender despite being outmanned and outgunned. The members of the cell were responsible for killing two Almaty police officers in the same village in a roadside shooting on November 8 and were planning new attacks in Almaty (Tengrinews, December 5). This cell may also have been involved in a similar November 11 shooting in which two police officers in Almaty were killed (Central Asia Online, November 11).

In the JaK statement issued three days after the Boraldai village shootout, the group said "We are ready to be killed in the thousands in order to support [Islam], and losing our lives is a cheap price that we pay for this cause." As in previous statements, JaK taunted "the apostate forces of the Nazarbayev regime" that JaK says "attacked a base where the five lions of the al-Zahir Baybars Battalion of Jund al Khilafa were gathered..." [1]

The composition of the Boraldai village cell resembles the cell of Maksat Kariyev, a former expert rifleman in the Kazakh army who went on a two hour drug-induced murderous rampage in Taraz on November 12. He killed five security officers, one gun-shop guard, and himself in a suicide explosion that took out one police commander. Kariyev's cell was comprised of six to seven members and had a spiritual leader (Tengrinews, November 30; RFE/RL, November 30).

Jund al Khilafa issued a statement praising Kariyev's "martyrdom" four days after his attack (ansar1.info, November 16). The speed with which JaK released

the statements about Kariyev's attack and the Boraldai village shootout and the accurate details they contained show that the JaK leaders based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region are well informed about the operations of JaK cells in Kazakhstan.

Kariyev's attack, however, was planned within Kazakhstan. After six members of Kariyev's cell were arrested in mid-November, the investigation showed that the spiritual mentor and other cell members had drawn up the attack plans for Kariyev and purchased and stored the RPG-26 grenade launcher, RGD-5 grenade, Makarov pistol and two sawed-off shotguns that Kariyev used in the attack (Tengrinews, November 30).

In contrast, the JaK leadership provided direct instructions for an ultimately botched October 31 operations to a cell in Atyrau from their base near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The cell members were only responsible for buying the components for the explosives in local pharmacies, assembling the bombs, and carrying out the attacks according to JaK's orders (Interfax [Astana], November 9).

The operation in Atyrau failed when one bomb detonated without effect in a garbage can and the other device blew up the militant before he reached his target. This was perhaps a reflection of the fact that the attackers in Atyrau were radicalized Muslims with no previous military experience. They had connected to JaK only after they independently decided to carry out a terrorist attack. JaK may have selected more experienced militants like Kariyev if the plan had originated with the JaK's leadership.

JaK has shattered the idea that Kazakhstan can continue to remain insulated from the violence 1,000 miles south in Afghanistan and across the Caspian Sea in the North Caucasus. In December 2006, Kazakh security forces dismantled Hizb ut-Tahrir's (HuT) networks and seized computers, printing presses and 25,000 pamphlets belonging to HuT (Interfax-Kazakhstan, December 22, 2006). In November 2006, Kazakh authorities arrested eleven people from the terrorist cell Stepnogorsk Jama'at, which was planning hostage sieges, explosions, and robberies to fund attacks on state officials (Izvestiya Kazakhstan, December 26, 2007). From 2007 to 2011, there were no major terrorist attacks in the country despite Nazarbayev's policies of restricting religion and maintaining authoritarian control of the country's

politics and resources.

As JaK's violent spree shows, Kazakhstan can no longer remain unaffected by regional geopolitics for several reasons:

- The havens in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region provide the JaK leadership with the operational space and connections to plan attacks with the Taliban, conduct media campaigns and recruit new fighters. In addition, many Kazakh students now in Pakistan have become radicalized and if they return home they could present a long-term threat to the country (Tengrinews, October 20).
- The Arab Spring has made secular autocracies in the Muslim world more vulnerable by destroying the myth of their invincibility. The JaK said in an October 21 statement that the Nazarbayev regime would follow Tunisia, Egypt and Libya because of Nazarbayev's anti-Muslim policies (*Noviy Regyon* [Moscow], October 26). [2]
- Kyrgyzstan's weak internal security can be exploited by Kazakh terrorists as a means to smuggle weapons into the country. Kazakh terrorists may also be able to hold meetings and hideout in Kyrgyz territory without coming under the surveillance of Kazakh authorities (*Kabar* [Bishkek], November 14).
- The North Caucasus has become a source of Salafist influence in Kazakhstan, especially in the Western part of the country where Atyrau is located. Said Buryatsky (a.k.a Aleksandr Tikhomirov), the late Russian-born Islamic convert who became a jihadi ideologue in the North Caucasus before he was killed in a Russian special operation last year, served as the source of inspiration for the Atyrau cell (Tengrinews, November 9). In the JaK message after the Boraldai village shootout, the group blamed Russia for "the repression of the Kazakh people."

Given the geopolitical factors surrounding JaK's rise, the group is unlikely to fade away like the Stepnogorsk cell or lose influence like Hizb ut-Tahrir five years ago. Rather, Jund al Khilafa will likely continue attacks on Kazakhstan security forces similar to those carried out by the Kariyev cell and the Boraldai village cell.

Jacob Zenn holds a Juris Doctorate from Georgetown Law where he was a Global Law Scholar. He is an international affairs analyst with experience in all seven Central Asian "Stan" countries, including completing a course of Russian language study in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2007, Farsi/Tajiki language study in Samarkand, Uzbekistan in 2008, and Uighur/Uzbek language study in Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, China in 2011.

Notes:

1. <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/jund-al-khilc481fah-22on-the-death-of-five-of-its-members-in-the-state-of-almaty-kazakhstan22.pdf>
2. For the video, see: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xly24k_yyyyyyyyyy-yyyyyyyyyy-yyyyyyyyyy_news#from=embediframe

Bringing London's "Christmas Bombers" to Trial

Raffaello Pantucci

Almost a year after their arrests just before Christmas 2010, a group of young British Muslims denied charges of "conspiring to cause explosions likely to endanger life or damage property" (BBC, December 2, 2011). The men, described as being of South Asian origin, are alleged to be part of a plot to strike "iconic targets" in London that was disrupted before Christmas (*Telegraph*, December 20, 2010).

Initially, twelve individuals were arrested in connection to the case with cells identified by police in Birmingham, Cardiff, East London and Stoke-on-Trent (*Guardian*, December 20, 2010). However, in the end the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) chose to only proceed with charges against nine men, identified as Gurukanth Desai, 28 of Cardiff; Omar Sharif Latif, 26 of Cardiff; Abdul Malik Miah, 24 of Cardiff; Mohammed Moksudur Rahman Chowdhury, 20 of London; Shah Mohammed Luftar Rahman, 28 of London; and Nazam Hussain, 25, Usman Khan, 19, Mohibur Rahman, 26 and Abul Boshier Mohammed Shahjahan, 26, all of Stoke-on-Trent. [1] All stand accused of conspiring to cause an explosion and preparing for acts of terrorism. Five of the men are also accused of possessing material useful in the preparation of terrorism, and four are charged with owning two editions of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) Inspire magazine and a copy of Saudi ideologue Muhammad bin Ahmad as-Salim's famous tract "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad" (AFP, December 2).

The details of what exactly the men were planning will emerge during the course of the trial, but according to information already released the men were allegedly planning to target the London Stock Exchange, the American Embassy, the London Eye Ferris wheel and prominent religious and political leaders as well as secondary targets like restaurants, pubs and nightclubs (Channel 4, December 27, 2010; *Daily Mail*, December 28, 2010). The men stand accused of "igniting and testing incendiary material," suggesting a plot in a relatively advanced state, but local sources told Jamestown that police conducted the arrests in Stoke and Birmingham unarmed, indicating they did not expect a very dangerous operation. The operation, codenamed "Guava," was revealed to have been part

of a long-term surveillance effort by Britain's security services when the then-Independent Reviewer of Counter-Terrorism Legislation, Lord Carlile, told a Parliamentary committee that he had been aware of the operation for some time and had been invited to participate in observing the surveillance (*Telegraph*, December 21, 2010).

The group's connection with core al-Qaeda is unclear; while sources indicate that at least one of the suspects was believed to have traveled to Pakistan with the intent of connecting with the group, their connection to other radical groups in the United Kingdom is clearer. According to sources in Stoke-on-Trent, the men were known to have been active in the broader network of individuals connected to the now-banned radical group al-Muhajiroun and had attended protests organized by the group (*Telegraph*, December 20, 2010). [2] Locals in Cardiff identified some of the group as having attended a meeting organized around previously jailed al-Muhajiroun leader Trevor Brooks (a.k.a. Abu Izzadeen) and claimed that the men were part of a group of 15 boys that the community was aware were involved in meetings organized locally by al-Muhajiroun. They said they had mentioned their concerns to authorities, but the security services were apparently already alert to the group's existence (*Telegraph*, December 22, 2010).

Another interesting detail to emerge about the Cardiff group was that the three Cardiff men had served time in prison for petty drugs and theft offenses. According to a neighbor, the men "went to prison as petty criminals and came out expressing extreme views," suggesting some level of radicalization in prison – a problem that has long concerned British authorities (*Telegraph*, December 22, 2010). There was also confusion about one of the Cardiff men, Gurukanth Desai, whose name indicates an Indian origin, though it was reported that he had changed it recently by deed poll. The reason for this change was unclear, though his chosen name is the same as that of a fictional Indian character in a 2007 hit Bollywood movie (*Calcutta Telegraph*, December 30, 2010; *Times of India*, December 28, 2010).

The trial against the men is due to start in late January, 2012 and is likely to prove to be a major case in highlighting the potential danger of radical groups like al-Muhajiroun providing a space for groups of radicals to congregate. In addition, much is likely to be made of the group's use of *Inspire* magazine as early evidence suggests they were attempting to use the magazine's bomb-making recipes to construct their devices. The

fusion of these elements shows how the more traditional aspects of Britain's jihad continue to have strength: A hardcore of extremists still exists in the UK, eager to try to connect with radicals abroad and interested in planning attacks on the homeland. Absolute numbers are hard to come by, but with at least two large terrorist plots (including this case) and a number of terrorist support network cases currently working their way through the British legal system, British security services will have to remain on high alert through next year's London Olympic Games.

Raffaello Pantucci is an Associate Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) and the author of the forthcoming We Love Death as You Love Life: Britain's Suburban Mujahedeen (Hurst/Columbia University Press).

Notes:

1. See: http://www.cps.gov.uk/news/press_releases/150_10/.
2. For more on the banning of al-Muhajiroun and its successor groups, see: *Terrorism Monitor*, January 21, 2010 and November 23, 2011

The Turn to Armed Rebellion in Syria: The Rise of the Free Syrian Army

Chris Zambelis

Tensions in the Levant remain at a fever pitch as the uprising against the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad presses ahead into its ninth month in the face of a relentless government crackdown and a rising body count. Occurring on the back of the popular revolts launched against incumbent autocrats that have taken the Arab world by storm, opponents of the sitting Baathist regime operating under the auspices of the Syrian National Council (SNC) are leading the charge to forge a unified political front against the regime. Led by Paris-based professor Burhan Ghalioun and composed of a disparate array of activists based in Syria and abroad, including Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the SNC serves as an umbrella movement agitating for the fall of the Baathist regime. [1] The SNC continues to petition the international community to levy additional punitive measures against Damascus. In a sign of its growing clout, SNC leaders recently met with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Geneva, her second meeting with the group.

While domestic and international pressure builds on Damascus, the Baathist regime continues to demonstrate its resilience. The regime's resort to suppressing dissent with violence, however, has triggered a violent response in kind by a murky network of defectors from the Syrian Army and other sections of the security apparatus as well as civilian volunteers who have collectively dubbed themselves the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Having established formal contacts with the SNC, the FSA has steadily gained traction as the official armed wing of the Syrian opposition (al-Jazeera, November 16).

A Call to Arms

In the FSA's July 29 inaugural statement, FSA commander Riyad Musa al-Asa'd and seven other defecting officers outlined the FSA's positions and mission. Al-Asa'd is a Syrian Air Force colonel who defected from his position after refusing to follow what he alleges were orders to open fire at unarmed protesters. In a call to arms, al-Asa'd implored members of the Syrian Army to join the FSA while lambasting the actions of the Syrian Army:

"The Syrian Army now represents only the gangs that protect the regime" (al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 1). Remarking on the officers' decision to defect from their posts, al-Asa'd added:

Proceeding from our nationalistic sense, our loyalty to this people, our sense of the current need for conclusive decisions to stop this regime's massacres that cannot be tolerated any longer, and proceeding from the army's responsibility to protect this unarmed free people, we announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army to work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity to bring this regime down, protect the revolution and the country's resources, and stand in the face of the irresponsible military machine that protects the regime" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 1).

Al-Asa'd followed with a threat to his former military colleagues: "As of now, the security forces that kill civilians and besiege cities will be treated as legitimate targets. We will target them in all parts of the Syrian territories without exception" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 1). [2]

A Budding Insurgency

The FSA has staged a number of attacks on Syrian military and security force targets. The FSA has also struck civilian facilities linked to the regime, including offices associated with the ruling Baath Party. The formation of the FSA signals an attempt to unify the multiple pockets of armed resistance that are being formed by defectors from the Syrian Army and other armed factions. As is often the case with nascent insurgencies, accurate reports regarding the number of FSA fighters are hard to find, but estimates range from the high hundreds up to 25,000 men organized into 22 battalions across Syria – the latter a bold exaggeration likely crafted to amplify the perception of the FSA's capabilities (al-Jazeera, December 2). FSA leaders operate from refugee camps along the Turkish-Syrian border in Turkey's southern Hatay Province, although Ankara insists that it is not lending the group operational support. Hatay and other regions in southern Turkey are host to thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the violence back home. In spite of Turkish denials of support, FSA fighters are exploiting the relative safety they enjoy in southern

Turkey to mount attacks against Syrian forces (*Hurriyet* [Istanbul], December 6). The FSA is also alleged to have established bases in northern Lebanon and northern Jordan, regions that have similarly witnessed an influx in Syrian refugees (al-Jazeera, October 28). Overall, the FSA appears to be growing in strength and scope.

Since emerging on the scene, the FSA has boasted of engaging Syrian security forces across the country in armed skirmishes, hit-and-run ambushes, assassinations, and other operations conducted in and around hotbeds of opposition such as the cities of Homs and Hama (located in the west-central part of the country), and the northwestern Idlib Province along the Syrian-Turkish border (al-Jazeera, September 27). It was the FSA's November 16 attack against a Syrian Air Force Intelligence facility in Harasta (approximately six miles northeast of Damascus) that elevated the group's profile in Syria and beyond. Previously seen as a ragtag assembly of fighters, the attack using rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and coordinated small arms fire against a hardened target like the intelligence facility at Harasta demonstrated a new level of operational sophistication for the FSA. The symbolism behind the attack is also noteworthy: Syrian Air Force Intelligence works in concert with other sections of Syrian Military Intelligence to root out dissent within the armed forces (al-Jazeera, November 16). The FSA attacked an additional Air Force Intelligence facility on December 1 in Idlib Province, killing at least eight members of the unit (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], December 2). Elsewhere the FSA has executed attacks against Syrian military and police checkpoints and armored vehicle convoys. Fixed installations such as police stations are also being struck with increasing regularity.

The FSA and SNC appear sensitive to allegations directed against them by the regime and their detractors in Syria and abroad that they are harboring criminal or terrorist militants with radical Islamist or other insidious agendas within their ranks. SNC head Ghalioun and other key figures in the opposition recently met with FSA leaders in Turkey to convince them to restrict their activities to what Ghalioun labeled "defensive" as opposed to "offensive" operations to maintain the "peaceful nature" of the uprising.

During a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal* outlining the opposition's position on a number of key issues, Ghalioun expressed his concern about the role of the FSA in a post al-Assad scenario: "We do not want, after the fall of the regime in Syria, armed militias

outside the control of the state" (*Wall Street Journal*, December 2). A December 8 attack in the region of Tal Asour against a major pipeline that transports crude oil to the refinery in Homs and similar attacks targeting Syria's economic infrastructure have elicited a fierce reaction from the regime, which blames "terrorists," a euphemism for the FSA and the broader opposition. The FSA has not claimed responsibility for the attack against the pipeline. Opponents of the regime allege that the pipeline was sabotaged by Damascus, possibly in an effort to discredit the opposition in the eyes of the residents of Homs (*al-Akhbar*, December 8). The FSA has also engaged in a series of lengthy firefights in recent weeks, including a battle in the northern town of Ain al-Baida along the Syrian-Turkish frontier that followed an attempt by 35 FSA fighters to infiltrate Syrian territory from Turkey (*al-Akhbar*, December 7). The FSA engaged Syrian forces in another major confrontation in the southern towns of Busra al-Harir and Lujah near the Syrian-Jordanian border (*al-Akhbar*, December 11; al-Jazeera, December 12).

In spite of claims by the regime and its opponents that it is receiving foreign support, the FSA appears to be relying on light automatic weapons, RPGs and explosives, essentially the weapons carried by servicemen prior to defecting from the Syrian Army. A brisk trade in arms between Lebanese smugglers with access to Lebanon's copious arms market and their Syrian counterparts is also helping to replenish FSA weapons and ammunition stocks (*al-Akhbar*, December 4). It is unclear if the FSA is receiving intelligence support or other forms of assistance to bolster its operational capabilities. The FSA has expressed its wish for foreign military support akin to the assistance NATO and other members of the international community provided to Libyan insurgents during their struggle against the regime of Mu'ammar Qaddafi regime (*Hurriyet*, October 8). The FSA has also called for the international community to impose a no-fly zone over Syria (al-Jazeera, November 20). With an eye toward winning over international public opinion, the FSA operates an extensive information section issuing regular announcements online through its official Facebook page as well as a network of websites sympathetic to its cause. The FSA has also posted video footage of its attacks on YouTube and other online social media outlets. FSA leaders as well as regular members frequently engage with journalists to make their case.

Filling the Ranks

A great deal of uncertainty surrounds the composition of the FSA and its ultimate intentions. The Islamist component of its SNC partner has elicited similar concerns regarding the overall trajectory of the Syrian opposition. Specifically, the sectarian makeup of the FSA, a group dominated by low-ranking conscripts and officers of the Sunni Arab majority, has led many to examine the potential influence of ultraconservative Salafists or even al-Qaeda-style militants on the movement. The public role of the banned Muslim Brotherhood in the SNC is already well known (al-Arabiya [Dubai], November 17). The dominant role of the Alawis, an Islamic sect viewed by many orthodox Muslims as heretical, is a source of widespread resentment within the Sunni community. President al-Assad is an Alawi and many of the most influential positions in politics, the economy, and the security services are dominated by his Alawi allies. The specter of creeping sectarianism in Syria has left many fearful of the prospects of a sectarian-driven civil war.

Damascus regularly attributes a role to criminal gangs, domestic and foreign terrorist organizations, and international rivals such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in sustaining the FSA and the broader opposition movement (Syrian Arab News Agency, November 30; December 10). Concerns about radical Islamist influence within the FSA and the opposition were frequently conveyed to this author in discussions with Syrians living and working in Beirut, including many who sympathize with the demands of the opposition. [3] FSA and SNC leaders categorically refute reports of radical Islamist influence within their ranks.

Battleground Lebanon

A consideration of Syria's alliance with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas – the so-called “Axis of Resistance” – against the backdrop of the uprisings that are upending the regional status quo provides insight into the multiplicity of interests at play. The regional fallout stemming from the ouster of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the concurrent displays of dissent in Bahrain and other U.S. allies is a trend viewed by many as strengthening actors such as Iran and Hezbollah even as their ally Syria contends with its own crisis. In spite of their popular appeal among wide segments of Syrian society, the actions of the FSA and its SNC partner must also be considered in the context of the greater rivalry between the United States and its regional allies on one side and

Iran and Syria on the other. The reaction of key actors in neighboring Lebanon to events in Syria, a country whose fortunes are tied so closely to Syria, also reflects this trend.

Support for the FSA and the Syrian opposition is being broadcast out of Lebanon. Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli, a traditional center of Salafist activism, has seen a number of protests against Syria. Prominent radical Salafist clerics in Tripoli, including Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, have called on Syrian Sunnis to join the uprising against the Baathist regime (*Daily Star* [Beirut], July 9). Beirut has also witnessed a number of protests in recent months by anti-Syrian demonstrators. Lebanon's U.S.- and Saudi-aligned March 14 Alliance (which includes former Lebanese prime minister Sa'ad Hariri's Sunni-dominated Future Movement) is in the forefront of organizing anti-Syrian activities in Lebanon. March 14 dominates the political landscape in Tripoli, where it enjoys a loyal following among the local Salafist community.

The March 14 Alliance's rival in Lebanon is the March 8 Alliance, which features Hezbollah, a close ally of Syria and Iran. Hezbollah has not shied away from affirming its support for Damascus. To mark the occasion of Ashura on December 6, the day when Shi'a Muslims mourn the death of Hussein during the Battle of Karbala in 680 BCE, Hezbollah Secretary General Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah made a surprise public appearance in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiyeh, his first public appearance since 2006. Reiterating Hezbollah's support for the Syrian president, Nasrallah declared: “We remain in our stance; we support the reforms in Syria, and we are with a resisting government,” adding that “some people want to destroy Syria and compensate for their loss in Iraq” (al-Manar [Beirut], December 12).

Conclusion

Syria has fast emerged as a battleground for the wider currents angling to shape a new geopolitical map of the Middle East in their favor. Damascus believes that the FSA and its SNC partner are acting to shore up the position of the United States and its Gulf allies following the resilient displays of dissent in Egypt and other pro-U.S. authoritarian regimes, the perceived gains made by Iran in Iraq and the wider Gulf region, and the growing influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon. On the surface, SNC head Ghalioun's intention to steer Syria away from its strategic military relationships with Iran and Hezbollah in a post al-Assad scenario in favor

of friendlier relations with Gulf countries appears to vindicate the Baathist regime's claim that the FSA and the opposition in general have a duplicitous nature.

Syria, in essence, sees the FSA and SNC as illegitimate proxy forces acting at the behest of hostile foreign interests. Many of the objectives and interests of the FSA and SNC clearly converge with those of Syria's rivals, a reality that strengthens the regime's narrative of domestic and regional events. At the same time, the reality of having to confront a widening insurgency that is becoming progressively more aggressive and effective in the midst of sustained international pressure does not bode well for the regime's long-term stability.

Chris Zambelis is an author and researcher with Helios Global, Inc., a risk management group based in the Washington, DC area. He specializes in Middle East politics. The opinions expressed here are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of Helios Global, Inc.

Notes:

1. See <http://www.syriannc.org/>. See also Terrorism Monitor Brief, October 15, 2011.
2. The FSA's inaugural videotape statement is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZcCbIPM37w>.
3. Lebanese expressed similar concerns regarding the extent of radical Islamist influence inside the Syrian opposition and the potential of spillover of instability into Lebanon in the event that the regime falls. Insights gleaned through numerous discussions with members of the Syrian community in Beirut, as well as Lebanese, Beirut, Lebanon, November-December 2011.

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